

THE HORSE AND THE BULL IN PREHISTORY AND IN HISTORY

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For a Juridical Ethnoarchaeology of the Bull (and Horse): Sacrifice, Circunvalation & Ordeal in Celtic Iberia

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Abstract: The present article deals with the existence in Late European Protohistory of legal rituals aimed at defining a space and its borders by means of sacrifices, votive offerings, circumvallations, and singular combats the main participants of which were bovids and equids. Evidences of this kind of rites and beliefs in Medieval and Modern Age in Europe and in the Iberian Peninsula stand as *longue durée* phenomena that allow to consider new interpretations in archaeological contexts, at least in the case of Celtic Europe.

Keywords: legal ritual, territoriality, sacrifice, bull combat, circumvallation.

Resumo: O presente artigo aborda a existência na Proto-história Europeia Tardia, de rituais jurídicos destinados a definir um espaço e suas fronteiras por meio de sacrifícios, oferendas votivas, circunvalações e combates singulares cujos participantes principais foram bovídeos e equídeos. Evidências desse tipo de ritos e crenças na Idade Média e na Idade Moderna, na Europa e na Península Ibérica, destacam-se como fenômenos de *longue durée*, que permitem considerar novas interpretações em contextos arqueológicos, pelo menos no caso da Europa Céltica.

Palavras-chave: ritual legal, territorialidade, sacrifício, combate de touros, circunvalação.

The numerous legal, literary and ethnographic evidences found in Europe and in the Iberian Peninsula -related to customary law- constitute a little-known method of diachronic access to the immaterial records -symbolic, ideological, institutional- of Recent Protohistory (Almagro, 2009: 96s, Moya-Maleno, 2008 & 2012). In the present case, we will focus on some rituals and myths regarding the delimitation and appropriation of territory the main participants of which are bovids and equids. Thereby, we take up a comparative and long-term approach method in Anthropology, History or Archaeology that we consider will allow us to go more deeply into institutional and symbolic contexts that would be utterly inaccessible to us otherwise: sacrifices, votive offerings, circumvallations and singular combats.

An Odd Exceptional Case

An exceptional document in this respect is a notarial deed dated 1566 that describes the foundation of blacksmith's forge Quinta do Recondo (Quiroga, Lugo, Spain) (Migues, 1995; Tenreiro, 2007: 180ff). That text details how a stud bull is carried before a demarcating retinue (formed by a nobleman, smiths, witnesses and a notary) that later go through the property fixing its boundary stones until they circumvallate it completely. Once the route is finished, the animal is introduced in the forge and its head is placed on the anvil. At that very moment, the owner orders to activate the hammer mechanism and the mallet hits the animal's neck violently, cutting out the head immediately. Afterwards, one of the workers at the forge took the amputated head and went around the territory again wetting the bounds with the blood that still flowed from it. At the same time, the first iron produced by that blacksmith's forge was forged (inaugurally) on the anvil, still bloodstained (Migues, 1995: 120). We will only pay attention to two elements of this complexly sequenced legal ritual: the sacrifice of the bull and the role that the animal plays in the demarcation -pre- and post mortem- of the territory.

Animal Sacrifice and Building the Land

The sacrifice and ritual of delimitation of this forge shows an archaism that could be compared to the demarcation of the cities of Andujar and Jaén one century before, described by the Chronicle of Miguel Lucas de Iranzo that tell how a ram was killed by spear thrusts and its decapitated head was buried under one of the bounds (Delpech, 1990: 155f). In both cases it note a relationship between the animal remains (head and blood) and the frontier, which reminiscent some "construction rituals" (Tenreiro, 2007: 182). Until the XIX century, in some places in France it was common to water the foundations of houses or churches "*with the blood of one animal, mainly that of an ox*" because it was believed that in such a way the buildings would not collapse (Sebillot, 1985: 124). Similar customs existed in Germany (Sartori, 1989: 20), Scandinavia (*Ibid*: 42; Bächtol & Hoffmann, 2005, 164ff) or the British Isles (O'Suilleabháin, 1945: 49), where the skull of a horse, ox, or cow used to be placed inside the walls, or under the ground, as a means of protection against evil.

Archaeological parallel practices can be traced in Antiquity or the Middle Ages, but also in Prehistory, age from which ritual remains of animals have been found in houses, walls, settlement pits (Merrifield, 1987: 50-57); Alfayé, 2007: 31f; Karl, 2008: 121-3) or even on the boundaries of cropping lands (O'Connor, 2010: 1643). In Classical Rome, the importance of the *pomerium* is well-acknowledged (Dion. Hal., A.R. I 88, 2), as well as of the periodical purifications of the fields (*arbarvalia*), the cities (*amburvium*) (Benveniste, 1969:

376; Schulard, 1981: 82f) or the boundary stones (*terminalia*) (Ovid, *Fast*, II, 645-56) by means of animals sacrifices, preceded in the two first cases by a *circumvalatio*. These rites of diverse typology (construction, delimitation, purification) share one common element: they constitute “inaugural” moments in which these social spaces (domestic, civic, agricultural, borderline) are created or recreated by means of a sacralization act that fixes and determines them. In these rites we observe an association between magical/sacred concepts such as “protection” and “propitiation”, as well as with the legal notion of “appropriation” (Tenreiro, 2007: 187), since this founding act confers a series of “primordial” rights on whoever carries it out (individual or community) over the space defined in this way “in origin” (Schmitt, 1950: 487).

Through and Around the Land

This indissoluble sacred and legal values that the circuit of the ox from Quiroga also shows has clear parallel cases in European law (Moya-Maleno, 2010). Gregory of Tours reports that the first thing that a Frankish king had to do when coming to the throne was to circumvallate his kingdom (Greg. Tur. *Hist Franc*, IV.14) and the *Capitulare de Villis* identifies the circumvallation of a land as way of takeover (MGH, *Leg.* II.I.85). Welsh *Madinogi* describe as well how the kings had to circumvallate their kingdom once a year *-cylch-* (Loth, 1913: 113, 175f; Fernández Nieto, 2005: 601). Thanks to a poem from the XII century describing the *cylch* of Owen Cyfeiliog (1130-1197), sovereign of Powis, we know that the route around the country was related to the boundary stones delimiting it as well as with renewing the domain over them: “*What though our prince, with prosperous rounds, / Has measured Cambria’s lovely bounds*” (Stephen, 1894: 45). Until the XVI century, in Poland and Moravia, the boundaries of the cities were annually renewed with a procession named *equitatio*, during which the noblemen and the commoners went with the vice-chancellor around the boundaries, stopping frequently to swear on the boundary stones (Czarnowski, 1925: 347). These routes remember in their formal and functional elements to other communal processions of the Iberian Peninsula such as *La Caballada -Horse racing-* of Atienza (Guadalajara, Spain), *La Descubierta* of San Pedro Manrique (Soria, Spain) Spain) and of similar ones like *Encamisá* (Domínguez, 1984: 19; Fernández Nieto, 1999: 187-90; 2005: 592).

The association between animal and *circumvalatio* also could be extended to private law. Thus, in Medieval Iceland, the heir of a land had to take possession of it surrounding it by horse in the case of men or accompanied by a cow in the case of women (Lecoteaux, 1999: 99f). In Ireland, the legal procedure to claiming a disputed property (*tellach*) consist in crossing its limits riding a horse and accompanied by a witness and, on some cases, riding over a burial

mound that acted as a limit (Kelly, 1998: 186-8). An interesting analogous practice of the Irish tellach can be found in another Indo-European context. The Hindu *Asvamedhaparva* tells how the horse destined to the great royal sacrifice (*asvamedha*) was set free for a year in order to graze around the kingdom borders. If the animal entered a foreign kingdom, his sovereign had the duty to acknowledge his dependence or to submit the autonomy of the reign to the judgment of a singular combat (Mahabh. IX, 72). From Herodotus (IV.7.2) we know that the Scythians -amongst other Indo-Iranians- looked upon the route of a horse as a ritual way of granting lands. The need for the champions combat is comprehensible if we understand the fact that the horse crossed the border as a form of “ritual annexation” of the territory, thus abolishing previous sacredness and territorial order by the same means that had established them before.

Face to face: Combats for the Land

The same cyclical conflictive and agonistic logic is apparent in some European and Peninsular traditions in which the main characters are bovids and equids that constitute an active and fundamental part in the ritual and solemn definition of a boundary. Alonso de Palencia (1975: 185) mentions the confrontation between the bulls from both banks of river Guadiana -the ones from Mourão (Evora) against those from Villanueva del Fresno (Badajoz)- as an omen of the result of the war between Portugal and Spain (1475-1479). In Asturias, (Álvarez Peña, 2007: 274ff) legends about singular combats between bulls representing each their community (village/parish) have been collected as well. The fights between the bulls from Proaza and Tameza, or those from the Virgin of Covadonga and the Virgin of Saúbu (Amieva), settled and fixed the limits of pastures, that were established wherever the defeated animal fell. These are interesting instances in that they show a clearly parallel situation -even in the red/white colour of the animals- to the border fight between the bulls from Ulster and those from Connaught narrated by the Irish *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (O’Rahilly, 1967: 270-72). On the other hand, it is necessary to note the existence in the Iberian Peninsula of combats -real combats- between communal bulls that push one another bumping on their heads (FIG. 1) such as the *chegas de bois* from the Galician-Lusitanian *raia* -“frontier”- (Muiños, Bragança, Montalegre, etc.), the *engarra* or fight between bulls of tudanca breed (Cantabria), or those from Tierra de Alba in Zamora (García Lomas, 1949: Pict. XVII-1; Rodríguez y Rodríguez, 1983: 133; Veiga de Oliveira, 1984: 252ff). These singular combats are also known to have taken place in Europe, from the *Combat des Reines* between the cows from Swiss Valais and Italian Aosta Valley to the *boğa güreşleri* from Artvin, in Georgian-Armenian Turkey, and from those from Northern Iran (Tokdemir, 1993: 186) to the horses com-

bats in Scandinavia and Iceland (*skeid*, *hestaat*) in which cows (*bu-skeid*) also participated occasionally (Espólín, 1827: 21f; Solheim, 1956: 30f, 51-63).

Amongst other outstanding characteristics, we must emphasize the fact that those combats always took place in meaningful places -normally border pastures- and at special periods -holy day (1) or Sunday- and the fact that the contending animals were deeply associated to their village/parish (*boi do povo* “ox of the village”). They used to be chosen from the communal stud bulls that had previously been local champions (Fontes, 1992: 84f.) Such characteristics and those of the legendary ordeals by bull combats are in accordance with a agonistic symbolism with deep Indo-European roots and with the transcendence of the political-legal-religious Assemblies, e.g. Irish (*Oenach*), Scandinavian (*Thing*) or Peninsular cases, in which the ritual competitions between people and/or animals were part of a liminal space and time employed to cyclically readjust the order and ease tensions and settle conflicts through the divine will of the result (Nally, 1922, 36-7, 47ff; Solheim, 1956: 63-8; Moya-Maleno, 2007; *Id.*, 2012: 294ff).



Fig. 1: European bovids & equids combats. (1) “Chega de bois” Fojo, Castro Daire, Portugal (photo: J.G. Lorena); (2) “Combat des Reines”, Aosta Valley, Italy. (3) “Engarra” Cantabria, Spain (García Lomas, 1949: Pict. XVII-1); (4) “Heestat”, horse fight, Iceland (photo: arkeologi.blogspot.com).

Likewise, there is a significant partial coincidence between the geographical distribution of these Peninsular traditions and the area of the so-called *verracos* (Fig. 2), sculptures of the Second Iron Age representing male bulls or pigs that have been interpreted as protective elements of settlements (2) or bound-

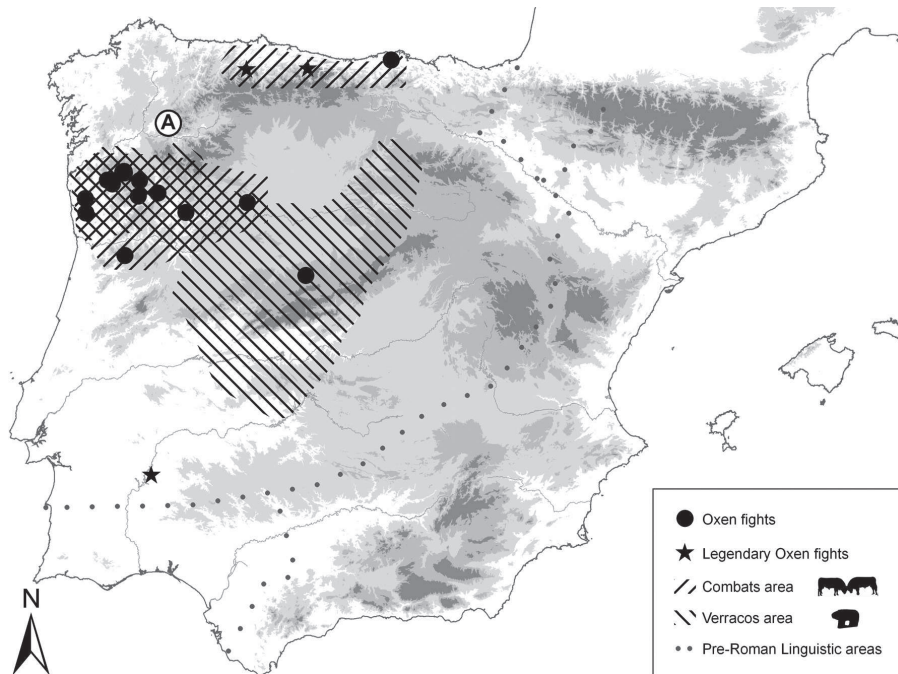


Fig. 2: Folkloric and legendary bovids fights in Iberian Peninsula and distribution of the *verracos*. (A) Foundational rite of the blacksmith's forge of Quinta do Recondo (Quiroga, Lugo).

ary stones of pastures, according to the case (Álvarez Sanchís, 1999: 284). In contrast to a merely economic interpretation, we believe that examples such as Guisando -where a considerable accumulation of statues of bovids can be found- could play the role of a cross-community joining places (maybe like a sort of sanctuary). In such “liminal” spaces, similar rituals to the aforementioned (sacrifice, circumvallation, ritual competition) could have taken place periodically. This would be linked to the neutral and ambivalent role of the border in the Celtic world, a role that makes it prone to become the place where sanctuaries (*nemeton*) are located (Ó Riain, 1972: 13-6; Santos *et al.*, 2006: 213-5).

The role of the rite or myth in the materialization or visualization of the boundaries is another characteristic that should be taken into account. In this regard, the description in the Irish *Táin* of a vast territory sowed with the meat pieces of contending animals dismembered during the combat (O’Rahilly, 1967: 271) is connected to the relevance that the death and the placing of the animal’s remains have in the “construction” –not ritual now, but mythical- of the landscape and the communal boundary. In the same way, the footprints left in the stone by the bull from Saúbu’s Virgin at the shout of: “Plunge here, my bull!” brings up numerous cases of marks in stones and ichnofossils linked to hierophanies, founding myths of sanctuaries and other magical

events related to equids and bovines -often related as well to such significant saints as St. James or St. Laurence (*inter alia* Martínez Ángel, 1998; Coimbra, 2005; Álvarez Peña, 2010: 62). In these events, an Indo-European cosmological background can be traced (Alonso Romero, 2002: 127ff.; Moya-Maleno, 2012: 391). These narrations and “signals” in stone -as is suggested in the Pre-Roman sanctuary and astronomical observatory of A *Ferradura* (The Horseshoe) (Amoreiro, Ourense, Spain) (García Quintela y Santos, 2008: 281f)- would be a mnemonic aid for constructing mythical landscapes, for “creating the memories” (McCauley & Lawson, 2002: 52-4) of symbolical places: forbidden, favourable or simply neutral. These marks in the landscape, its myths and rites would be decisive for the creation and projection of boundaries as symbolical as economical, as tangible as intangible at the same time, for the different Hispano-Celtic communities.

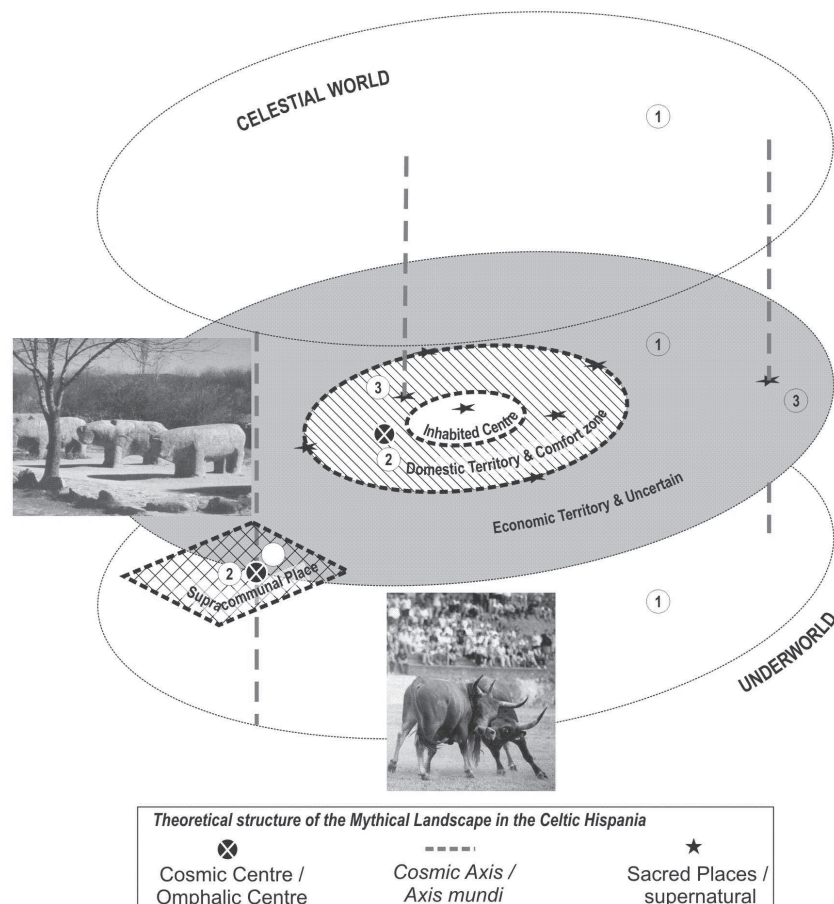


Fig. 3: Model of the Mythical Territory in Celtic Iberia: Other World (1); Cosmic Center - Omphalic Place (2); Cosmic Axis and *Axis Mundi* (3).

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, we believe in the evident potentiality -not yet exhausted- of a research line that interconnects literary, ethnographical and archaeological sources to address some immaterial questions concerning the societies of the European Iron Age. This is a renewed viewpoint by which -through long-running processes- we can enter a broad and polymorphic panorama of legal-religious practices and beliefs; in the present case, myths of (re)creation, singularization and appropriation of the territory whose main characters are animals (equids and bovids) from the Peninsular and European Celtic regions. Some practices, such as isolated or cyclical singular combats aimed at settling boundaries and rights of use, are rooted in concepts well-known in cosmology and in the agonistic spirit of Indo-European nature; other practices, such as circumvallations, the placing of sacrificed animals remains or the footprints carved in stone, can even be verified archeologically. The proposal outlined here, rather than simplifying these facts turning them into universal archetypes, aims at understanding them -in their historical dimension- adapted to each community and to the concrete background of each moment and always inextricably linked to the structural mechanisms of space definition.

Notes:

1. The fact that during the mass the prayers addressed at the saint asked for the victory of the *boi de povo* (Fontes, 1992: 85) of his parish is clearly connected with the Asturian traditions about ordalic combats between the bulls from different saints.
2. Some verracos located close to the settlements entrances, walls or other defensive elements such as *chevaux de frise* (Álvarez Sanchís, 1999: 279) could suggest that they served the same sacralizing and protective purpose than the aforementioned animal remain deposits, emphasizing the importance of the door as a “liminal” space par excellence (Tenreiro, 2007: 186, 191; Moya-Maleno, 2012: 237). It is significant that the strip decorating the back of some verracos has been related to the *dorsuale* that decorated the sacrificial victims in Rome (López Monteagudo, 1989: 144, 149).

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